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ABSTRACT

An Education Writers Association seminar in Atlanta focused on the link between illiteracy and the workplace in the South. State economic development policies are largely bypassing rural areas, and the effects of this urban-rural split include persistent high poverty rates, population loss, and unemployment. Changes in the workplace, particularly the emphasis on problem solving and critical thinking, mean that illiteracy in the workplace is growing. Current school reforms have not yet turned the tide on the illiteracy problem. Economic development in the South is creating a service, not a high-tech economy, with implications for the match between workplace skill needs and systems for delivering education. Strategies for economic development must be multifaceted, but adult literacy programs must be emphasized in the South. (Addresses and telephone numbers are provided for the seminar presenters. Addresses and telephone numbers are provided for five additional sources: Education Commission of the States, Council of State Policy and Planning Agencies, National Governor's Association, Northeast/Midwest Institute, and Western Governors' Association. A bar graph showing the relationship between unemployment and illiteracy in the South is included.) (CML)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

MYTH #3:

THE SOUTH IS RISING AGAIN

Japanese managers of industrial plants in the South treat U.S. employees as "Third World workers."

With that observation, former U.S. Secretary of Labor Ray Marshall, now an economics professor at the University of Texas, opened a Pandora's box in front of reporters attending an Education Writers Association seminar in Atlanta. The statement called into question a lot of assumptions about adult literacy levels and programs, economic development and policies that link them.

The seminar, an activity of EWA's Media Resource Project on Literacy funded by the MacArthur Foundation, focused on the link between illiteracy and the future workplace in the South. A region that traditionally has intrigued writers and historians, the South is full of anomalies, ironies and contrasts. This certainly characterizes its economic and education outlooks, according to seminar speakers. In this decade, the South has done more to reform schools and woo high technology as strategies for catching up to the rest of the country than any other region. With the highest illiteracy rate, the South also has the farthest to go. And, according to some discussions at the seminar, the South still doesn't recognize dead-end streets.

The material and discussions were specific to the region, but they illustrate for any reporter trying to cover the issue of workplace literacy that much lies under the rhetoric. While Atlanta was dug out of the snow during this January meeting, reporters, representing eight Southern states, weighed comments about other "snow jobs."

On a regional basis, these are some issues that could be explored.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF AN URBAN/RURAL SPLIT?

State economic development policies largely are by-passing rural areas. For the South, this is particularly devastating. Except for Indian reservations in the Southeast and Midwest, all of the counties in the country with persistent high poverty rates are in the rural South. Further, 90 percent of the nation's rural blacks live in the South; those counties with the highest minority population are not growing economically.

In all other regions, rural areas had more people moving in than moving out during the 1970s, a reversal of the historical pattern. In the South, however, rural counties continued to lose population. With most elected black officials from rural areas, University of Georgia rural sociologist Douglas Bachtel warned of a "brain drain" that will decrease minority political representation. Further, an older white population left in rural areas will be disinclined to raise taxes to support a largely poor, minority school system, he said. Pockets of high unemployment in the South primarily are in rural areas, as are the counties with the highest dropout rates, according to data presented by Stuart Rosenfeld, deputy director of the Southern Growth Policies Board. His data, as well as that of John Handy, director of the Southern Center for Studies in Public Education, show clear ties between unemployment and low levels of education.

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Studying particularly the situation of black males, Handy found the greatest growth in jobs to be in the suburbs, further depressing employment among minorities in the cities. They cannot find affordable housing in the suburbs or adequate transportation to them. Over the last 35 years, the percentage of blacks employed has remained constant at about 54 percent, but this is due to increased employment among females. For males, the employment level fell from 72 percent to 60 percent between 1950 and 1985. Another statistic to look into--the increase in the number of "zero" wage earners among blacks in the cities. Over 30 percent of the black male population in the cities is not working, compared to 19 percent of white males.

IS ILLITERACY GROWING IN THE WORKPLACE?

Both Ray Marshall and Sue Berryman, director of the Center on Education and Employment at Columbia University, said literacy problems in the South are being compounded by changes in the workplace. Workers today must understand the whole production process, not just one piece of it; contribute to innovations; and deal with uncertainties and incongruities, said Berryman. In other words, they must work smarter. Problem solving and critical thinking always have been encouraged among the elite, she added, but now they must be a part of education for all. Other research challenges the distinctions between "head and hand, academic and vocational, in-school and out-of-school," Berryman said.

No matter how literacy is defined, this country has some serious problems, said Marshall. "We have only marginal competency." The South has tried to compete on the basis of low wages, he said, but those industries are moving to South Korea, where wages not only are low but so are illiteracy and dropout rates. According to Marshall, the main advantage of the United States is in technology, "and unless we constantly improve, we will lose that."

Using a Nissan plant in Tennessee as an example of the availability of a quality workforce, Edward Jones, panel moderator and editor of the Nashville *Banner*, noted it found 3,000 skilled employees, trained or retrained by the state and the plant. Marshall described the situation differently. The plant "creamed" from the available pool, kept its high-tech jobs in Japan, and instructed its managers "to deal with the employees as Third World workers." (The makings of a good investigative story -is this the pattern for the 208 Japanese-owned plants now located in the South?)

Reluctant Learners

As the South tries to shift from industrial to high-tech or service economies, its literacy problems will increase because of the dislocation of workers. Reporters could find a wealth of stories in how workers make transitions to new jobs and the attitudes they hold about retraining, said Don LeBrecht, head of the National Association of Broadcasters' Productivity Council. Using focus group interviews at several sites where workers were being dislocated, the council's study found that retraining needs to be viewed as a positive step. But it takes a long time for workers to understand that.

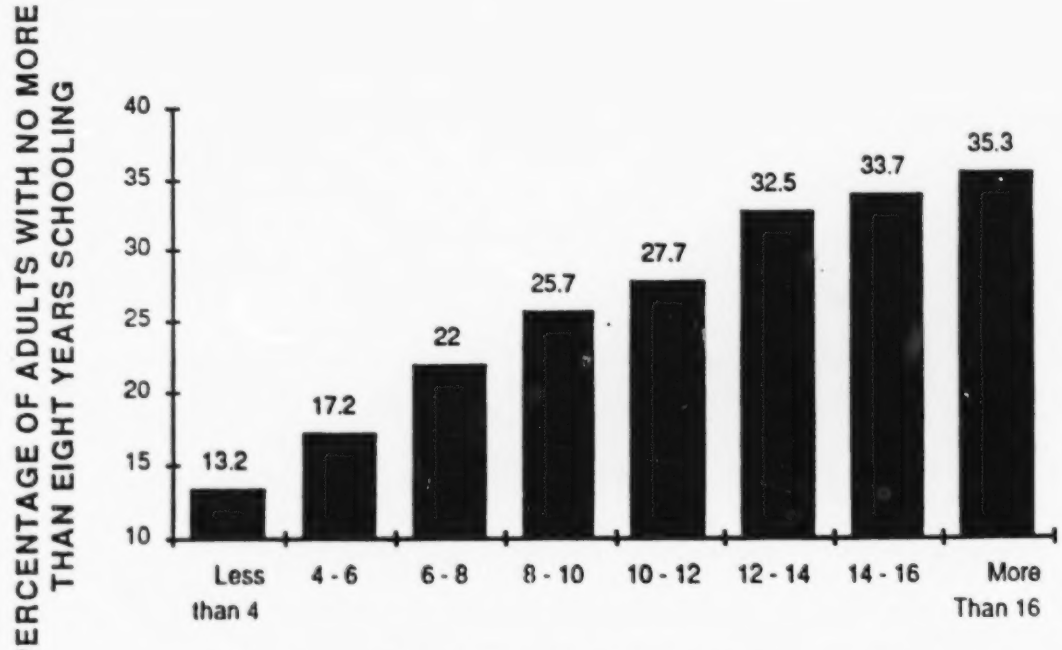
LeBrecht told reporters that individuals have to cross a number of barriers--disbelief about losing a job, guilt over seeing the layoff as a personal failure, isolation from others in the same boat, lack of information about help and options, pride, fear of starting over. Those who seek retraining before it becomes absolutely necessary have an easier time of it, he said, but too often individuals wait too long. He also said "retraining" is a negative word; workers need to learn about "options" and "opportunities."

ARE CURRENT SCHOOL REFORMS TURNING THE TIDE ON THE ILLITERACY PRO M?

One of the most well-covered education stories of the past few years has been the South's efforts to improve schooling. However, Marshall said the effort so far has been mostly "show and tell--doing obvious things." Schooling still is rooted in conditions of the past, he said, with the emphasis on rote learning and an assumption that all learning takes place in the classroom. The kind of education needed--that will allow the United States to maintain a high standard of living -- must be much more creative and persuade people to value intelligence, he said. Marshall also held up the Job Corps as a good education program. It takes those with low literacy levels a long way in a short time by combining technology and non-traditional learning systems.

Marshall's bottom line is that public education is in trouble. If it doesn't improve, the Yuppies will go to private schools, and business will take over many of the functions of higher education, he said.

Figure 2. Unemployment and Illiteracy, SGPB South



Source: Southern Growth Policies Board, 1987

WHAT IS THE REAL IMPACT OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT?

The South is becoming a service, not a high-tech economy. If the symbol of growth in the South is Hardee's, not Saturn, will the economy really push education higher. If rural areas are bypassed by economic development, won't the problems of illiteracy and poverty continue to move to the cities? What happens when industries lured to the South do not "buy in" to the community but merely "rent" it?

Historian James Cobb of the University of Alabama asked some piercing questions about the patterns of economic development and whether they will bring about higher literacy in the South. The South traditionally has not had an incentive to make a big investment in education because it was tied to low-wage industries, Cobb said. And, just as the slave-holding economy picked up and moved further West without making any long-term investment in local communities, so too can the high-tech companies the South is pinning its hopes on. "Circuit boards are very mobile," he said. (Cobb pointed out one misconception about the growth in the Sunbelt-only Texas, Florida and 11 urban counties account for that growth).

To prevent the South from shooting itself in the foot again with unwise economic policies, Cobb advised reporters to consider how policymakers and the public would settle for a service economy. That doesn't offer the same expectations as does a high-tech economy, he said, but it may be the South's best hope. The South, Cobb said, needs to sell itself "as a place to live." Sunbelt growth may be tied far more to an increase in people rather than to an increase in factories. If so, there are major unanswered questions about workplace skill needs and education systems that would match those needs. Cobb also said reporters should examine the bargaining with industries. It should be more hard-headed and extract certain concessions, such as refusing to delay tax revenues and insisting on good wages.

Programs That Work

Illiteracy is a big problem and getting worse, said Lewis Pulling, head of Literacy Action in Atlanta. After more than 20 years spent developing what is considered one of the best adult literacy programs in the country, Pulling shared with reporters his views as to why adults wind up seeking help. These adults have very poor skills for handling more and more information because a high percentage of them "miscue on words that constitute 50 percent of our language." Literacy is the ability to use all of the "increments" of learning skillfully, he said, but millions are unable to do this, more for emotional than cognitive reasons. He also said that poor children especially are not mastering the skills of integration of information. Reasoning and remembering must be taught, he said, but it takes courage and confidence to learn them.

Whatever the causes for adult illiteracy, Rosemary Adams, director of adult and community education for the rural Grady County schools in south Georgia, has no trouble finding adults wanting to learn. She did have trouble getting them to classrooms. So, she corralled a used bus from the school board and remodeled it into a traveling, computerized learning center. The center--now a fleet of three buses--makes regular rounds to school sites more accessible to adults. One bus is now located on a plant site where it can be used by all three shifts. For less than $9,000, Adams says she is providing literacy classes to more than 500 adults.

WHAT'S THE BIG PICTURE?

The South is learning that strategies for economic development have to be multi-faceted, Rep. David Price (D-NC) said in concluding the seminar. The

quality of life, including educational and cultural opportunities, must be part of broad strategies, rather than an overreliance on industrial development.

But he came back again to the reasons for a heavy emphasis across the South on literacy. It is a moving target, he said, and keeps moving up. For example, IBM officials at Research Triangle Park, N.C., have told Price that all entry-level jobs with them soon will require two years of higher education. Yet, the South must deal with a population where 18 percent of high school graduates, not to mention dropouts, are considered illiterate.

Federal efforts for adult literacy training are way underfunded but not likely to increase greatly, Price said. Until solutions are found to solve "the stubbornness" of the problem and the failure of traditional adult literacy problems, there should not be a lot more money going to the states. Price heads the new Sunbelt Institute, and one of its current projects is to conduct a state-by-state survey of adult literacy programs, needs, and how they mesh with federal programs.

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OTHER SOURCES

For information on these issues not only in the South but other areas as well, try the following:

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